

When people ask filmmaker Eric Slade about his work and he starts spilling off his credits (they are impressive), the one response he invariably provokes is: "Really? You worked on *Hard Copy*?" That truly is the least of his accomplishments.

Dedicated to creating films that make a difference, Slade most recently added a significant contribution to the preservation of queer history. *Hope Along the Wind: The Life of Harry Hay* tells the story of our era's first gay activist. The film will be shown at a benefit screening March 3 at Hollywood Theatre.

In 1948 Hay penned the manifesto that sparked the modern gay rights movement. Working on behalf of presidential candidate Henry Wallace, he had set out to write a platform plank pushing to end police entrapment of homosexuals, a common occurrence at the time.

Instead, Hay authored a more startling document declaring homosexuals an oppressed minority; he believed what needed to change were societal attitudes. It's impossible to overstate how radical his ideas were in the rah-rah, an-apple-pie-on-every-table, post-war days.

So radical that it took Hay many months to collect a handful of gay men who responded to his vision. That core group, cloaked in secrecy and known to one another at first only by pseudonyms, eventually became the Mattachine Society, the country's first successful gay rights organization.

"The vision of the original group was a transformation of society," Slade explains. "They didn't just want to make it safe to be gay."

Ironically, the organization Hay started eventually ousted him for being too radical. In the dark days of the McCarthy era, the young men brave enough to join weren't quite ready to associate with a founder who recently had been a card-carrying Communist.

During the 1930s, many prominent progressive thinkers openly explored communism as an antidote to the Great Depression. For Hay, it turned out to be useful training in activism and direct action.

One of the more startling tidbits in the film is the revelation that Hay was politicized and introduced to Marxist ideas by one of his early lovers, actor Will Geer (yes, kids, Grandpa Walton), then a handsome young buck. The two joined legions of other activists and worked to raise awareness of the need for the very benefits we enjoy today: Social Security, health insurance and workers compensation. Hay quickly became a labor organizer and Marxist teacher, although homosexuality was not embraced within the party.

In fact, it wasn't until 1938 that "homosexual" turned up in a U.S. dictionary. Until then, the buzzwords were "nervous" and "that way."

Keeping history alive

Portland filmmaker documents the legendary life of Harry Hay

BY ORIANA GREEN



Harry Hay today—the activist is flanked by his longtime partner, John Burnside, and Portland filmmaker Eric Slade

When Slade showed his finished film to Hay—who, by the way, is still feisty at 89—his only criticism was that he wished the director had captured more of "the horrors we lived through." Still, *Hope Along the Wind* does make the point that pre-Stonewall, every time homos gathered they risked their

electro-shock "therapy" or even a lobotomy.

It took a long time for Hay to find the man of his dreams, but, happily, in 1963 he partnered up with John Burnside, and they've been together ever since. After colon cancer surgery two years ago, Hay sprang right back and looks forward to a big 90th birthday bash April 7 in San Francisco. His partner is still spry and "only 85!"

After Mattachine, Hay pioneered another gay movement. In search of answers to his three prevailing questions about homosexuals—who are we, where do we come from and why are we here—he began to study the berdache tradition among Native Americans. That confirmed Hay's belief that gays serve a purpose separate from heterosexuals, which led the two men to resettle in New Mexico and immerse themselves in tribal culture.

This, in turn, gave birth to the Radical Faeries in 1979. The film has some delightful footage of Hay and friends frolicking at the Faerie outpost in southern Oregon. As he puts it, he wanted to "create a place to heal from hatred."



The sexy and stoic Harry Hay circa 1930

reputations, jobs, homes and freedom. Being certified queer could land you in jail or a mental hospital, where you might be subjected to

Slade got to know Hay through the Radical Faeries. He says the idea for the project "had been percolating for a long

time, and it amazed me that no one had done this documentary."

But first the director accumulated that impressive list of credits, including his first job after Emerson College: working for Portland Public Schools in the television services department. Slade was a one-man band—shooting, producing and editing the series *School Reel*, which aired on KOIN-TV for a couple of years.

"The hook was that the kids were the reporters, and we won some awards," he explains. "It was great experience for me because I had to do it all—dozens and dozens of stories."

Slade then worked as an assistant editor at a large editing house, Northwest Video Works, doing television commercials, documentaries "and all kinds of high-profile, expensive stuff."

In 1987 he answered the lure of larger opportunities in San Francisco, where he worked as a free-lance director of photography on all kinds of projects, including for University of California on HIV and breast cancer education, and *Safety in Numbers*, a safe-sex video for the San Francisco AIDS Foundation, which, he confides, was "actually softcore erotica."

Slade is rightfully proud of his work for the Center for AIDS Prevention Studies as well as *Acting Up for Prisoners*, a film about the ACT UP campaign to bring HIV health care to women behind bars.

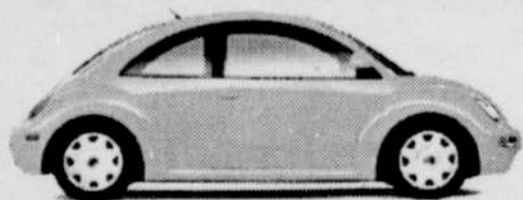
"In '93 all HIV-positive women in California were being segregated in one wing of one prison, but once ACT UP got the word out, things changed. Activists did a huge amount of good," he recalls. "And I wanted to do a documentary about how direct action works. That's why I chose Harry. He's one of those guys."

Slade, who recently moved back to Portland with his lover, believes Hay deserves to be revered alongside the other great civil rights leaders, and he hopes his film will help achieve that. If you ever meet up with the director, do him a favor. Exclaim: "Really? You made the Harry Hay film?"

HOPE ALONG THE WIND: THE LIFE OF HARRY HAY premieres 2 p.m. March 3 at Hollywood Theatre, 4122 N.E. Sandy Blvd. Tickets are \$10 at the door or \$25 for the movie and post-show reception at nearby Caravan Studios. Advance tickets are available for \$8 and \$20 from In Other Words and Gai-Pied. Proceeds benefit the Harry Hay Documentary Project. To send Hay a birthday card (or thank-you note), write in care of Mark Garrett, P.O. Box 14032, San Francisco, CA 94114. (If you feel like making a donation to his medical care, enclose that, too.)

ORIANA GREEN is a Portland writer who is thankful Harry Hay has balls of steel.

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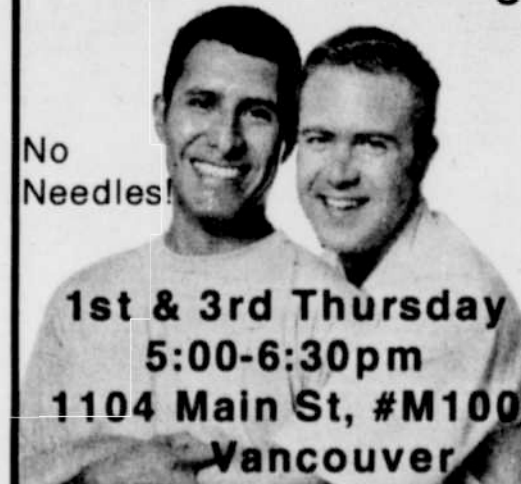
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